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ABSTRACT

"Language and Poverty," a volume published in 1970 that dealt with various topics concerning langauge and social class differences, argued that in educational programs for the children of the poor it is important not to confuse differences with deficits. It indicated that poor children had adequate language structures and skills for their environments and that comparing their language to standard American English and calling the difference a deficit had no basis in linguistic or communication theory. Since then, language programs have moved to more pluralistic strategies of instruction. Differences in situations demand different language behavior of people, which suggests the concept of "communication repertoire"--the combination of the communication needs of an individual and the ability to meet those needs. Media usage by lower class people for entertainment and escape and by middle class people for hard information is perhaps an example of socially stratified communication behavior. Theoretical attention should be paid to the proposition that an individual's range of spoken behaviors fits with the range of media behaviors, together forming a communication repertoire that correlates with social stratification. (TJ)

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SOCIAL CLASS DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM

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LANGUAGE AND POVERTY Revisited

It was approximately 10 years ago, this month that I began to assemble LANGUAGE AND POVERTY,[1] a volume on various topics concerning language and social class differences. The compilation of this book was undertaken under support from the Institute for Research on Poverty, which was a research branch of the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity. Do you remember the War on Poverty? That was the more popular term for the programs of this office.

LANGUAGE AND POVERTY was developed as a reaction to the social pathology model for dealing with problems of the poor, a model largely brought on through a combination of a weak analogy of so called "social disadvantage" with economic disadvantage, and by the heavy influence of educational psychologists upon the educational components of social intervention programs. The gist of LANGUAGE AND POVERTY was that in our educational intervention programs, particularly with children of the poor, we were too often confusing differences as deficits.

There had been a good deal of talk in the mid-sixties about the "cycle of poverty." It was postulated that economic disadvantage led to disadvantages in the learning environment in the home, which in turn led children from these homes to begin school at a disadvantage, and eventually educational disadvantages would manifest themselves in employment disadvantages. The cycle would repeat itself as this generation in turn reared its children.

Within this rather shaky analogy between economic disadvantage and social disadvantage, children's language became a popular topic for investigation and intervention. In part, it was popular to note that the children of the poor spoke in the "language of the poor". Thus it was assumed that "improving" these childrens' language would be a major means for improving their learning potentials. The reasoning was that educational intervention programs could not attack every subject, so why not focus upon the one skill through which other subjects became intelligible; that is, language.

The works of the British educational sociologist, Basil Bernstein[2] were also attracting attention at the time, although in retrospect Bernstein was often misinterpreted. Bernstein held that in Great Britain laboring and managerial classes could be distinguished by what he characterized as

restricted as against elaborated language codes. A restricted code was the informal language among peers or persons of close standing. Since its referents were shared by its users, this language was often implicit in meaning. It was used more for social functions than for topical explication. Its syntax was less complex than that of elaborated code. Elaborated code, by contrast, was a topical centered style of language, with much more complex varieties of syntax, and where meaning was markedly explicit. Elaborated codes were more formal, and were the language of education, among other formal things. The class differences according to Bernstein were that while the managerial class could use both elaborated and restricted codes, members of the working class had access to only the restricted codes.

The child psychologist Robert Hess, and some of his colleagues applied Bernstein's notion to lower class black families among other groups in America, noting that maternal childrearing practices in lower class homes seemed to make substantial use of a restricted type code, far more so than an elaborated one.[3] That is, the child of the lower social status home was much more involved in a language environment involving imperatives, and the lack of explicit verbal interaction, as compared with middle and upper class homes where a much greater value was placed upon elaborated verbal development. Given this line of reasoning, many began to associate social class differences in American dialects with restricted and elaborated codes, an identification which has little scientific linguistic basis.

The point in LANGUAGE AND POVERTY was that unless a child is suffering from some type of outright disability due to organic or neural misfunctions, he or she would have a markedly human propensity to develop a language system that was appropriate for the immediate environment. There are a number of quite adequately conducted linguistic and sociolinguistic studies, some of them included in LANGUAGE AND POVERTY, which indicate that the language of children from different ethnic groups and social classes is quite normal when gauged in terms of the demands of their environment. Thus in comparing the language of such children with so called standard American English, deficit was not a particularly appropriate word unless one assigned it to the linguistic norms of the child's community. Most such "deficit" evaluations reflected social attitudes about a community of individuals; they lacked any basis in linguistic or communication theory.

Thus it was argued in LANGUAGE AND POVERTY that it would be more productive to view these social class and ethnic variations more from the standpoint of a difference model than a deficit one. Although language programs of our schools and social intervention programs still leave much to be desired, it is heartening to know that in the last decade such programs have moved much more to bilingual-bicultural, or culturally pluralistic strategies for evaluation and instruction. We have also learned a great deal more about the language social class differences in language performance.

In the last decade two main generalizations have typically emerged in studies of language in social class. The first is that indices of social stratification have consistently correlated with certain measures of language performance. Mostly these measures of language performance reflect such abilities as meeting the demands of different communications situations handling their language complexities, and the like. A second generalization is that correlations of language performance and social stratification are often tied characteristics of particular communication situations. These communication situations can sometimes be differentiated on the basis of formality versus informality.

At the heart of the matter it seems obvious that it is not just language differences among people, but differences in the situations that demand language behavior of people. Thus rather than only identifying a particular class of person with a particular type of language, it seems to be more productive theoretically to identify his or her variety of language roles and how these roles correlate with different demands of communication situations. This suggests the concept of communication repertoire, which is essentially a characterization of different language, or more generally communication needs of an individual, and the ability to meet those needs. In the broadest picture, it seems that when the correlation between language performance and social stratification is examined in terms of communication needs, a higher status individual must meet the demands of a greater variety of situations, but not necessarily only more complex ones, than a lower status individual. Put into more practical terms, there may be a greater demand for linguistic diversity as one examines the communication situations required of individuals filling higher status roles than lower status ones. This is not to say that lower status roles are not complex, for indeed many are. However, a lower status person may find themselves meeting the demands of fewer diverse situations.

Further we should consider that the interdependence between the stratification of social roles and what appears to be the stratification of communication performance demands should probably be conceptualized as two sides of the same coin since performance of the social role will presuppose this communication. If social stratification chiefly represents the ordering of people in terms of criteria contributing to social ranking on such criteria as education, occupation, or income, it is not surprising to find correlations with communication behaviors because of the ordering of social roles. As one pursues this type of reasoning it increasingly conjoins theoretical questions about the social roles and communication repertoires of individuals, as do the studies of social class differences in media behavior and attitudes. Should not media behavior, as is language performance, be included within the notion of communication repertoire?

Media Use and Social Stratification

Unlike the studies of social class difference and language, research done in determining class differences in media usage, has generally commonly lacked as much theoretical basis. Even in studies which have purposively focused upon social stratification and media usage, usages have often been limited to one medium (there are now quite a number of television studies) and the time frame for sampling usage often raises questions as to how consistent the results would be if samples were to be drawn at other times, in the context of other events. and so on.

Despite these problems a number of generalizations have emerged about amount of media usage, media content preferences and comparative media attitudes. Without getting into these details,[4] such generalizations have frequently been made as: (1) The lower social classes tend significantly toward greater usage of the electronic media as compared with uses by the middle and upper classes. (2) The lower classes use mass media more for entertainment than for information purposes. (3) Television is a more "believed" medium than is print for the lower classes. (4) The upper middle and higher class individuals will tend to use different media to "verify" information, whereas the lower classes may take information at face value. (5) The middle and upper classes actively seek more information from the media than do the lower classes.

There are, of course, problems in drawing generalizations from studies of media use and social stratification. For

example, there is the problem of the degree to which data on an individual newspaper, magazine, broadcasting stations represent categories of such media. Can we talk about "television" for example, apart from its content, and apart from very subjective reactions to how people react to such content? Another problem is with stability of media habits and attitudes across time. That is, will media usage and attitude data compiled in 1978 still be relevant to 1988? Probably not. The chances are that media behaviors are not as stable across time as language behavior data. One is reminded of Elihu Katz's statement that if we were to return to study the role of the use of opera in 19th century Italy, we certainly would not put much weight on the study of one audience of one opera.

As in the speculations about social class differences in verbal behavior, it seems useful to take the social role perspective in considering social class differences in media behavior. Social stratification in a subtle way defines the degree of control an individual can have over the media of communication. The individual in the various social roles of the lower socioeconomic stratum is often relegated to the passive role of a media consumer.

A further social class distinction emerges from differences in what type of content is sought in the media. Here the generalization seems to be that the lower-class individual is more likely to seek entertainment and escape in the media, whereas the middle class individual additionally seeks some "hard" information and editorial comment about world events and problems. This reasoning reinforces an existing theoretical perspective on media usage, namely, we should study what people do with media rather than what media do to them. Given this point of view, it seems reasonable that media behavior be incorporated within the concept of a communication repertoire. Just as social roles require a variety of verbal behaviors, they also require a variety of media behaviors. In fact, many verbal and media behaviors serve complementary functions in a person's communication needs.

Consider the communication behaviors which allow an individual to gain information. Research has yielded evidence that members of the lower class depend more on interpersonal communication networks for information than upon the media.[5] This may be, however, a consequence of the interaction of social class differences and the type of information pertinent to their social role. It is speculated that the lower social class person, in their quest for a way of life that reduces insecurity without requiring occupation attainment,

will tend to forge a network of close kinship and peer relationships with similarly circumstanced class members. Such a network not only furnishes security, but also provides a news network pertaining to immediate events in the lives of peers.

The preceding generalizations do not deny that the middle-class individual's social roles require information from an interpersonal network. The major contrast seems to be that the communication demands upon the middle- and higher-class individual require information not available as efficiently from friends and family as from the mass media. Thus we find in many studies a reliance by the middle and upper classes upon the type of in-depth information obtainable from the print media. It is important not to overlook the telephone, which in our own studies, we find much used as an information source for the middle class.[6]

Taking the idea of social roles and the construct which explains social class differences in media and verbal behaviors, then the concept of communication repertoire would surely include the total range of an individual's communication behaviors. Thus in seeking or giving information, or in seeking and maintaining social relationships, an individual relies upon a variety of communication behaviors, the sum of which we would characterize as his communication repertoire.

The notion of communication repertoire has implications concerning the role of communication in socialization. As communication researchers as well as developmental psychologists have theorized, a child's learning and exercising of the communication modes of his home will mediate his social development.[7] As children exercise these modes, they become candidates for the perpetuation of the social roles characteristic of their families. It is not so much what is said but <u>how</u> it is said that socializes a child's communication strategies.

A further speculation is that the verbal behaviors learned by the very young child may themselves mediate in media behaviors. In a study of social class differences in children's language, I reported that one of the questions children tended to respond most actively to involved asking them what they watched on television, and then what they had seen in a particular program.[8] Social class differences were not only revealed in the type of language the children used to describe what they had seen on television but in the nature of what they described. Lower-class children typically

described high visual action segments of dramatic sequences, often apart from how those segments were a part of a story line. Middle-class children, by contrast, more often tended to describe not only these actions but the more abstract context of the story plot. In interpreting these differences, it was speculated that the lower social class child, who is socialized into a mode of concrete, action-type interaction, may respond to that type of speech rather than the more abstract dialogue implications that support a plot development. Again, the thesis here was that what children learn first in their verbal repertoires may limit what they develop in their media repertoires.

Lest it has not become obvious by this point, I am leading up to the concluding point that we should devote more theoretical attention to the proposition that an individual's range of spoken behaviors fit jointly with their range of media behaviors into a concept that I have been calling communication repertoire. Moreover, communication repertoire, as a larger concept than simply speech behaviors or media uses is what correlates with social stratification, mainly because social roles are performed by drawing from these repertoires. Finally, one of the types of communication repertoires a child develops in the home may well be the main process by which the social stratification characteristics of one generation are passed on to the next.

And to end on an opening note, I would like to stress that I feel that social stratification itself is more a case of differences than deficits. Thus the lessening of class stratification is more a case of increasing the tolerance of differences among groups of people and increasing the social role repertoires of individuals than it is one of "pressure cooking" the social characteristics of one group into the lives of a so called "deficit" group.

We have no other choice in our essentially multicultural society.

* * *

FOOTNOTES

1. Frederick Williams, ed., Chicago: Markham, 1970 (now New York: Academic Press).

2. For an overview see: "A Sociolinguistic Approach to Socialization," in Williams, ed., pp. 25-61.

3. Robert D. Hess and Virginia Shipman, "Early Blocks to Children's Learning," Children, 1965, 12, 189-194.

4. A number of such studies are included in: Frederick Williams and Robert H. Epstein, "An Annotated Bibliography of Research in Communication and Social Class," Los Angeles: The Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Southern California, 1976.

5. For example: Frederick Williams, Herbert Dordick, and Frederick Horstman, "Where Citizens Go For Information," Journal of Communication, 1977, 27:1, 95-99.

6. Williams, Dordick, and Horstman, Ibid.

7. For example: J. M. McLeod and G. J. O'Keefe, Jr., "The Socialization Perspective and Communication Behavior," in F. Gerald Kline and Phillip J. Tichenor, eds., Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research, Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1977, 121-168. See also Hess and Shipman.

8. Frederick Williams, "Social Class Differences in How Children Talk About Television," Journal of Broadcasting, 1969, 13, 345-357.